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NEW ORLEANS AT THE TIME OF THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE ¹

By EDNA F. CAMPBELL

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase (1803) population in the United States was, with a few exceptions, largely confined to the Atlantic seaboard. Among the exceptions was New Orleans, which was the focus of the life of the Mississippi Valley, as indeed it had been since the early days of settlement. The New Orleans of these early days has been sketched in a previous article.² Development of the town was slow despite the natural productivity of the region which made for a certain ease of life. Colonial policy both under the French and the succeeding Spanish domination was unfavorable; and, furthermore, the colonists suffered from certain natural handicaps. Uncertainties of weather affected the crops, notably indigo, which for a time was the staple cultivation. The topographic conditions of swamp and forest impeded expansion, and still more powerful was the factor of geographic isolation.

In the Mississippi Valley all roads led to New Orleans, and the ease of reaching its markets was a powerful deterrent to the growth of other towns

¹ The main sources used are:

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Amos Stoddard: Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana, Philadelphia, 1812.

² Edna F. Campbell: New Orleans in Early Days, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 10, 1920, pp. 31-36.

in the "Delta." As commonly spoken of by the writers of this period, the country south of the Atchafalaya-Red confluence on the right side of the Mississippi River was the "Delta." In this section the valley west of the river is many times larger than the eastern part, and in no place is the river bordered by bluffs. Natural levees and the scattered prairies afforded locations for settlers.

DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN LOWER LOUISIANA

At the time of the cession three-fourths of the population and seven-eighths of the wealth of Louisiana were concentrated in the Delta. It is somewhat difficult to give precise figures. Estimates vary widely; probably in large part because of the character of the population, only about half of which was regularly settled. The population of Lower Louisiana (i.e. south of latitude 31° N. and from the Perdido River to the Sabine River) may be placed at about 60,000, exclusive of Indians.³ Rather more than half, about 32,000, occupied the margin of the Mississippi; and of these between 8,000 and 12,000 were in New Orleans. The La Fourche region and the strip extending through Bayou Sara, Natchitoches, and Avoyelles each had about a tenth; the prairies of Opelousas and Attacapas contained nearly a fifth. The remainder occupied the high land in the vicinity of Lake Pontchartrain. Of this population little less than half were whites. The percentage of the blacks was rapidly increasing as the restrictions on their importation were being lightened. In more detail the distribution may be characterized as follows.

From Pointe Coupée parish, below the egress of the Atchafalaya from the Mississippi, settlements were continuous on the right side of the river to within 20 leagues of the Gulf. On the left, plantations beginning a short distance below Iberville bordered the river to about the same distance from the Gulf and about 27 miles below New Orleans. Sixty miles below New Orleans were Fort Plaquemine on the one side and Fort Bourbon on the other, marking the limit of settlement. At this point the swampy morass set a barrier to further extension. Settlement was such on both sides of the river as to give the appearance of a continuous village along the entire strip, but it was thinner on the right than on the left side. The best plantations were above and near New Orleans on the left side. On an average of about half a mile to a mile back from the river the plantations gradually merged into impassable cane and cypress swamps. The levees bordering the numerous bayous also afforded opportunity for settlement. Of such, three were of chief importance. The La Fourche had 200 families, mostly poor Spanish, scattered along its banks for some 45 miles. The Plaquemine, flowing from the Mississippi about 30 miles farther north, and the Atchafalaya, 130 miles still farther north, were similarly settled.

³ Robertson, Vol. 1, pp. 149-150.

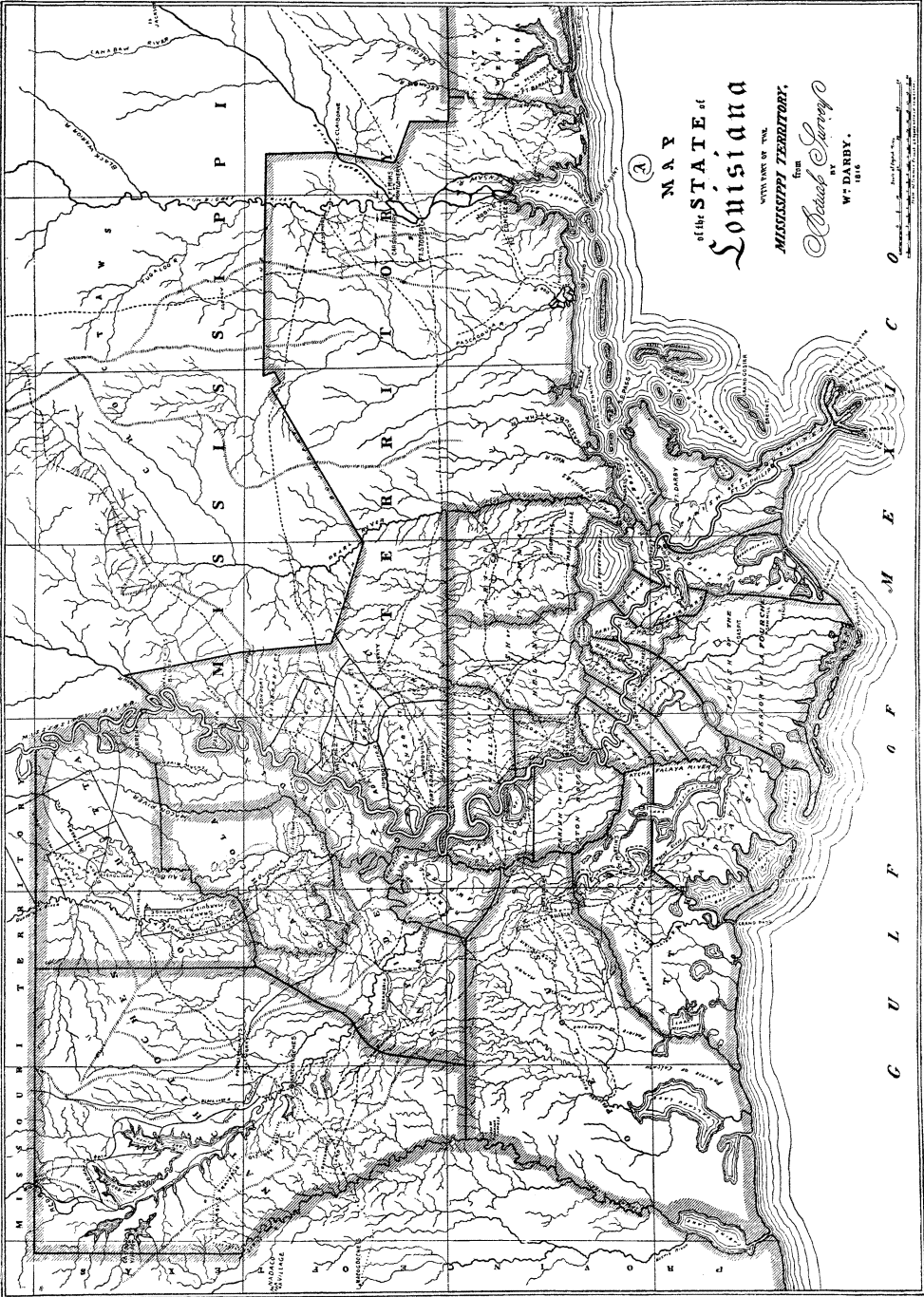


FIG. 1.—Darby's map of Louisiana accompanying the first edition (1816) of his "Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana." The original map is 32" x 44".

Along the Plaquemine only the left 20 miles below the efflux of the Atchafalaya were settled; elsewhere the danger of inundation precluded settlement.

On the east side of the valley similar conditions of bordering levees, cane swamps, and salt marshes existed throughout the area, with the exception of a dry strip of excellent land about a mile in width, extending from the Mississippi some ten or twelve miles below New Orleans eastward to the lakes. Here there was a poor settlement, known as *Terre aux Boeufs*, composed of about 800 Spanish who raised produce for New Orleans. The wealthy planters occupied the alluvial margin of the Mississippi, where the most valuable lands were on the projections of the river curves.

To the west and southwest of the Mississippi the "Coasts" of Opelousas and Attacapas were a network of bayous and swamps interspersed with strips of prairie. Opelousas covered about 7,600 square miles, and Attacapas 5,100, while other small coasts were Calcasieu, Grand, and Mamon. Most of the inhabitants of Attacapas lived along the Teche and the Vermilion. Of a great number of Americans who came into the region after the Purchase, many entered by way of the Atchafalaya; for it was estimated that the distance from the western states to the Gulf could be shortened more than 120 miles by descending that stream rather than the Mississippi. Furthermore, it was easier of entry.

GROWTH OF POPULATION

Pontalba had urged in 1800 that what was needed in Louisiana was working hands.⁴ His contention was proved in the early years of the century. In the twenty-five years preceding 1810 the population more than doubled, rising from 37,000 in 1785 to nearly 76,000 in 1810;⁵ and by 1820 to almost 154,000.

The remarkable growth was chiefly due to the opening up by the Purchase of a vast extent of fertile land. Here was an opportunity for the restless Americans in the period following the Revolution. Emigrants came especially from Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, western Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas. Excitement connected with Burr's movement on the Mississippi River brought hundreds to the valley. Refugees from war-harassed Europe added to the number. Much advertising was given the region by numerous publications, especially Jefferson's widely circulated pamphlet, the "Account of Louisiana." The majority of incomers were engaged in commercial pursuits, and such crowded along the Mississippi. The second great class of immigrants came to make homes and started their little plantations wherever was available fertile soil, combined with sufficient elevation for protection from flood.

⁴ Gayarré: *History of Louisiana: The Spanish Domination*, pp. 410-445.

⁵ Timothy Flint: *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*, Vol. 2, p. 233.

PASTORAL LANDS

The borders of the swamps were suitable for cattle and swine to range, and immense herds of cattle and horses and large flocks of sheep ranged the prairies as well. Darby spoke of these prairies as among the "meadows of America." The *vacheries*, as they were called, were the greatest in the United States by 1810. As many as 15,000 to 20,000 head of cattle and horses were brought from the Spanish provinces to North America, and Spanish methods in caring for them were used. Conditions were favorable for such an industry. Salt was cheap, being obtained from wells sunk in the Petite Anse hill along the coast. Wells fifty feet deep supplied water, as that from fresh springs on the prairie was inadequate. The meadows furnished an abundance of food, and little shelter was needed. It was estimated that the value of a *vacherie* doubled every four years, and that of a cotton plantation every three years.⁶

AGRICULTURE

Preparation of the ground for planting was a more difficult matter than in the north, necessitating more labor and hence more capital. If it were not a canebreak bottom, clearing involved the burning of a dense undergrowth of shrubs, thistle, and thorns. Cotton and sugar were the staple crops. Within a hundred miles north and fifteen miles south of the city sugar was the great crop. An acre of cane produced from 1,000 to 1,200 pounds of sugar and 50 gallons of rum. The sugar crop of 1802 yielded 5,000 hogsheads of 1,000 pounds each of sugar and 5,000 casks of molasses of 50 gallons each.⁷ At the time of the American occupation there were between 60 and 80 sugar plantations in the valley, and of these more than three-fourths were above New Orleans.

Cotton was grown widely, but the best sections were the upper part of Baton Rouge, Attacapas, Opelousas, and Pointe Coupée. Little else was grown by the rich and populous settlement of the last-named section. The cotton was fine but of short fiber. About 250 pounds, valued at 20 cents a pound, were grown on a single acre. In 1803 the production was 20,000 bales of 300 pounds each.⁸

In other parts of the valley the planting was more varied. Proprietors of large plantations grew cotton, while the owners of the smaller ones, many of whom were Germans, planted rice. Because of the need of water for flooding the fields, rice was grown only near the streams.

AGRICULTURAL TRENDS IN COLONIAL DAYS

A gradual evolution in agriculture had taken place in the valley. The chief crop of the first French planters had been indigo, a cultivation well

⁶ Stoddard, pp. 182-183.

⁷ Monette, *History of the Discovery*, etc., Vol. 1, p. 566.

⁸ Martin, Vol. 2, p. 234.

adapted to the character of the land, for the vigorous taproot of the plant easily penetrates hard, packed, marly soil. The crop, formerly reaching a total of 300,000 pounds, was reduced by the year 1800 to 100,000 pounds and thence diminished rapidly, amounting to only 3,000 pounds in 1803.⁹ The year of the locusts, 1794, had marked the climax of indigo production, after which cotton came gradually to replace it. There were other factors involved in the change. The damp climate of Louisiana was unfavorable. A glut of indigo on the European market lowered prices, and at the same time use of the saw cotton gin and advance in cotton prices favored the latter production.

Although indigo was abandoned by most of the planters, it still was grown by some, for there was prevalent a belief that a rotation of sugar and indigo made the planting of the latter practicable. The impression was current that the sugar cane destroyed the insects that were fatal to the indigo.

There was a further tendency to replace cotton by sugar where climatic conditions were favorable. A writer in *Niles Weekly Register*, commenting in December, 1815, on the change from cotton to sugar, spoke of the cane as more desirable, "being less liable to disease and accident, and requiring less labor to bring it into market, one acre in cane being also equal in value to three acres in cotton." "The Navigator" credits the planters with the statement that one-fourth of the cultivated land of any considerable plantation may be planted in cane, one-fourth left in pasture, and the other half used for provisions, etc., and a reserve for a change of crops.¹⁰

An economic evolution paralleled the agricultural. Indigo, cotton, sugar involved, in turn, greater capital. The first Americans to come into the valley after the Revolution were poor. Indigo required the least capital and labor of the three great staples. A gradual accumulation of money made possible the purchase of slaves, an increase in extent of landholdings, and the profitable cultivation of great cotton and sugar plantations. Consequently sugar was planted by the more wealthy proprietors and cotton by the poorer.

At the time of the Purchase there still persisted the belief that the valley held possibilities in the culture of the vine and the olive; for the similarity in climate to that of southern France was yet in mind. To test the possibility, the United States Government granted a tract of land to a company of French immigrants on condition that they should "introduce the culture of the vine and olive." In a discussion of the project, a writer of the period remarked "that from the time the ark rested on Mt. Ararat to the present day, wine has never been made to any great perfection upon the alluvial soil of large rivers."¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 234.

¹⁰ Cramer, p. 338.

¹¹ Darby, *The Emigrant's Guide*, etc., p. 22.

NEW ORLEANS AS A CITY

The valley was conspicuously a one-city region, no other center than New Orleans having as much as one thousand population. New Orleans owed its importance principally to its situation. The site, on the other hand, had many disadvantages. It was low; and the inhabitants, especially during the weeks of early summer, lived in fear of the river. Breaks in the levee were frequent. The expense of its repair and maintenance was high but was met in part by an anchorage duty of six dollars. Problems of sewage disposal and water supply were likewise serious. It was to conditions of filth, lack of drainage, and improper living that the contemporary writers attributed the prevalence of disease, for it was agreed that the climate was wholesome. Yellow fever did not appear in the valley until 1767. The disease was unknown in the country districts, where large families and longevity were the rule.

The situation of New Orleans offered compelling commercial advantages. It commanded the trade of the Mississippi River system, which included a maze of bayous that linked it with every settlement. It was the outlet for a fertile, almost level country more than 1200 miles in length from north to south and averaging 200 miles in width. It was only a short distance from the sea, at this period about 100 miles, and was accessible to ocean vessels. Trade with the West Indies and Mexico, for which the port was conveniently placed, was important at this time.

Furthermore, New Orleans was a double port, the second connection being furnished by the Carondelet Canal by means of which easy access was given to the region immediately to the northeast and an important source of lime, tar, pitch, lumber, and fish. The harbor was good. Its crescent shape afforded protection, as in the case of Natchez. Tides had little or no effect, but the depth of the river permitted the discharge of cargo by means of a bridge supported by two forty-foot spars.

OTHER POPULATION CENTERS

Excepting Natchez, all other centers were purely local. The occasion of each was the parish church, and the geographical feature that determined its site was either the high land of a levee margining the stream that provided transportation, or the intersection of an upland prairie by such a channel or by one of the few roads in the valley, or the junction of two of the streams.

By 1810 the only towns in the Delta other than New Orleans, worthy of the name, were Madisonville, the port on Lake Pontchartrain, at the junction of the Amite and Iberville; Donaldsonville, at the efflux of the La Fourche; Springfield, a resting place between Natchez and Madisonville; and Baton Rouge.

INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS

At the time of the Purchase, there were but few manufactures. These were connected largely with the agricultural products and were of the most

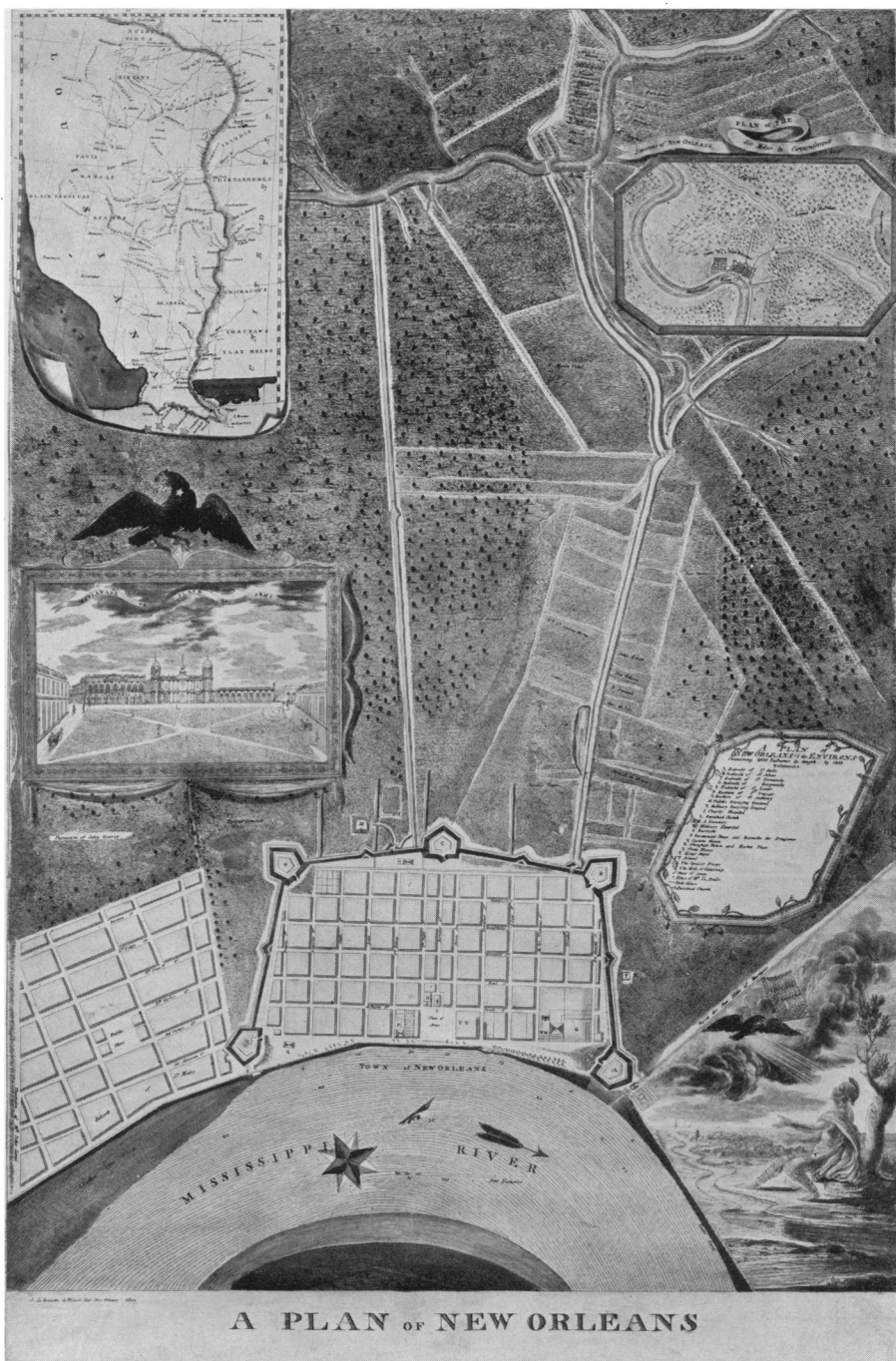


FIG. 2—Boqueta de Woiseri's plan of New Orleans in 1803. The original is 18¾" x 27".

primitive kind. Exorbitant prices of foreign manufactured textiles encouraged domestic industry. Women slaves were employed in spinning and weaving, and men slaves as carpenters and smiths. There were but two machines for spinning cotton, one in Opelousas and one in the parish of Iberville, and these were not always in operation.¹² In the suburbs of New Orleans there was a cotton mill capable of cleaning and baling a thousand pounds of cotton daily. This was one of the large public cotton gins in the valley. To such gins the proprietors of small plantations in the lower part of the valley brought their cotton. At New Orleans there were also a cordage factory and several factories for shot and for hair powder.

The great stock farms of Opelousas and Attacapas gave rise to an important tanning development. Little dairy produce was made in that section, however. Most of the surplus butter and cheese came from the Red River district, from which much was exported.

Aside from cotton ginning and the tanning of hides, the only industries of any significance were sugar refining and lumber milling. In 1796 there were 10 sugar refineries in the valley.¹³ One of these, located at New Orleans, produced yearly about 200,000 pounds of loaf sugar. Tafia, a kind of rum, was an important by-product. In the vicinity of New Orleans there were 12 distilleries, manufacturing more than 200,000 gallons yearly. Rapid expansion of sugar planting and the influx of a large number of refugees from Santo Domingo skilled in the manufacture of sugar led to a rapid growth of refining.

The most important industry at this period was the milling of lumber and the making of boxes for shipping sugar. In the slack season of autumn planters sent their slaves to the cypress swamps in the rear of their plantations. The squared timber was floated down the Mississippi by means of ditches cut through the swamp for the purpose. As the nearer sources were exhausted much timber also was cut from the unclaimed cypress swamp between New Orleans and Pointe Coupée and was floated on rafts down to New Orleans. Planters cut mill races through the levees and erected mills on them which, during flood time, were worked night and day. There were about 30 of these mills near New Orleans. Boxes, most of which were exported to Cuba and Havana, brought a revenue of more than \$100,000 yearly to the planters.¹⁴

Much timber, especially cypress¹⁵ which was much in demand for building purposes, had been taken from the islands in the river by the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that as early as that time a writer commented on the taking of timber from public lands as improper and urged that an effort be made to prevent the wasteful use of lumber. This was probably one of the first suggestions for the conservation of timber in this country.

¹² Martin, Vol. 2, p. 234.

¹³ Robertson, Vol. 1, p. 154.

¹⁴ Gayarré, *History of Louisiana: The Spanish Domination*, p. 439.

¹⁵ Darby, *A Geographical Description, etc.*, p. 74.

COMMERCIAL CONDITIONS

Commerce in the region, up to this time, was one-sided. Exports, though gradually increasing during the later colonial period, never equaled imports in value. The year before the Purchase exports by way of the sea amounted to about \$2,160,000, and imports to \$2,500,000.¹⁶ As New Orleans was the port of the entire western country the total exports, amounting to nearly 40,000 tons, included part of that output as well. The principal items were flour, 50,000 barrels; tobacco, 2,000 hogsheads; salt beef and pork, 3,000 barrels; cotton, 34,000 bales; molasses, 800 casks; sugar, 4,000 hogsheads; peltries, naval stores, and lumber.¹⁷

Commercial relations were established not only with European countries but with Cuba, Santo Domingo, and American towns as well. The latter commerce included a coasting trade with Atlantic and Gulf ports and an exchange with the western country.

Until 1800, French vessels made exchanges chiefly with Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Nantes. By 1802, American and Spanish vessels had largely replaced the French.¹⁸ The rapid increase in sugar and cotton planting led to more than a tenfold increase in the number of vessels.

The small commerce reflected the small production, which was limited to lumber, agricultural products, and furs. The English had managed to secure control of the fur trade, and the Spanish had no great incentive in that direction, as furs were not in great demand in Spain. Not until the great staples, sugar and cotton, began to dominate the planting was there an important agricultural surplus.

Down-river trade at the close of the period preceding the steamboat was estimated at \$15,000,000. Besides this about 50,000 bales of cotton and 15,000 hogsheads of sugar from Mississippi and Louisiana were exported from New Orleans. Exports from New Orleans averaged \$2,000,000. At the same period about 500 vessels entered yearly from domestic and foreign ports.¹⁹

TRAFFIC ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

The basis of early French settlement in North America was the fur trade, and, in the absence of roads, the superficial exploitation of the country was based on the streams, on whose borders all the settlements were to be found.

Until 1720 it was largely furs that made up the cargoes on the Mississippi and its tributaries. About this time the nature of the traffic changed. The Illinois colonists in the southern end of the valley needed the foodstuffs produced above. To the growing town of New Orleans French ships were bringing merchandise and supplies, making it the commercial center of the valley. To handle the resulting trade barges, "keels", and flatboats were used.

¹⁶ Stoddard, p. 296.

¹⁷ Martin, Vol. 2, p. 236.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 234.

¹⁹ Monette, *The Progress of Navigation*, etc., p. 515.

The long, narrow keel boats ("keels") carried from fifteen to thirty tons. They were light in weight, of small draft, and were propelled by oars, sails, setting poles, cordelles, and by bushwhacking.²⁰ Bushwhacking, or pulling along by the bushes, was the method used when the boat ran close to the margin of the stream in high water. The "Kentucky flats," or "broadhorns," were arks from fifty to eighty feet long and fifteen feet wide, capable of carrying from twenty to forty tons. Many of them were protected from rain by slightly curved roofs. They were more unwieldy than the keels and could not be used in such shallow waters. Five men, on an average, were required to navigate one.

The barges were the largest of these boats and carried from fifty to a hundred tons. They were fitted with sails somewhat like those of a schooner. In ascending the Mississippi, when the wind did not serve, the unwieldy craft was warped upstream by means of two yawls. This required from thirty to thirty-five men, and only six to eight miles a day could be covered. The journey from New Orleans to Cincinnati, thus made, consumed from ninety to a hundred days.²¹

Navigation of the river was laborious and dangerous, but despite all difficulties traffic on it grew rapidly in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth. Not till the Louisiana Purchase, however, was trading sufficiently safe to point its steady development.

Until about 1820 the trade of the lower Mississippi originated largely in the Ohio basin, inasmuch as settlement was most advanced in that region. Much flour was produced, for which the natural market was New Orleans. Louisville was the starting point for most of the boats, and the journey from that point to New Orleans required from thirty to thirty-five days. The surplus products of the settlements along the Monongahela, the Ohio, the Kentucky, and the Cumberland consisted of flour, pork, whiskey, apples, cider, lumber, horses, cattle, and lime. Of these, flour was by far the most important. In 1824 Ohio shipped 300,000 barrels of flour, amounting to one-fourth the value of all the products descending the Mississippi.²²

The Missouri River valley contributed little other than peltries to the traffic of the Mississippi. The Indian trade of Upper Louisiana proved highly profitable; but south of the thirty-second parallel it served only to impoverish the valley and retard its development, for it diverted attention from agriculture, and the furs were of comparatively small value.

Spring and autumn were the busy seasons for the boatmen engaged in the trade on the Mississippi. Every considerable farmer in the "western country," or Upper Louisiana, built his boat each season to send his surplus to the New Orleans market. Only a few of these boats ever returned owing to the laborious nature of the upstream journey, in which human en-

²⁰ Timothy Flint, *Recollections, etc.*, p. 91.

²¹ *Idem*, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*, Vol. 1, pp. 151-152.

²² F. H. Dixon: *A Traffic History of the Mississippi River System*, *Natl. Waterways Commission Doc. No. 11*, Washington, D. C., 1909, p. 17.

ergy was the power. Furthermore, the expense was a large item, the cost of cheap, heavy articles being doubled by the freight charges. Dry goods, hardware, and similar articles could be brought by wagon to Pittsburg from Baltimore and Philadelphia more cheaply than by water from New Orleans. In many cases the boatmen returned by land, leaving the Mississippi at Natchez and taking forty-five days for the 1,100-mile trip back to Lexington. So arduous was this that many of the boatmen returned by sea from New Orleans to Philadelphia or New York.²³

In the second decade of the nineteenth century the advent of the steamboat wrought a marvelous change in the life of the pioneers and in the character of the traffic on the Mississippi River. In 1817, 1,500 flatboats and 500 barges brought produce to New Orleans; by 1821, 287 barges came regularly to the city. The Faubourg St. Marie was the trade center. On account of slack water in front of its *batture* the flatboats moored there. Strife between Creoles and Americans gave rise to three municipalities, the old town of "Vieux Carré," the Faubourg St. Marie (a suburb), and the Faubourg Marigny (a suburb). The governments of each were distinct, but there was a Mayor and Council for the whole. Vieux Carré was the Creole section, retaining control of the trade in coffee, indigo, sugar, rice, foreign fruits, and wines; while cotton, tobacco, pork, beef, corn, and northern British goods were received in the American section. In 1825 the commerce of New Orleans was worth \$17,000,000. In 1835 it had trebled. By 1840 New Orleans was the fourth city in population in the United States.

The decades 1840-1860 were flourishing times for New Orleans. Very considerable drainage was effected by the New Basin and Melpomene Canals. A tide of European immigration was flowing in at the rate of 300,000 yearly, of which a large percentage was German. The first railroad of the region (1820-1830), and one of the earliest in the United States, connected New Orleans with Lake Pontchartrain;²⁴ and the New Orleans and Nashville and the Mexican Gulf came into existence in the later thirties. By 1860 two railroads joined New Orleans with the railroads of the Mississippi Valley and Texas. The first was to Jackson, Miss., and the second to Opelousas, La.

Receipts from the interior jumped from \$45,700,000 in 1842 to \$107,000,000 in 1851. New Orleans and the valley were humming with prosperity. The steamboat had done much to nullify the influence of geographic isolation. The course of progress in the valley seemed open to an almost unlimited development though, as transpired, other influences entered shortly that turned the stream of commerce away from New Orleans.

²³ Michaux, p. 182.

²⁴ Henry Whittmore: Fulfilment of Three Remarkable Prophecies in the History of the Great Empire State Relating to the Development of Steamboat Navigation and Railroad Transportation 1808-1908, [Brooklyn? 1909?], Part II, pp. 23, 25.